

Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin: The historical issues

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27 April 2012

In the two months since the murder of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin there have been numerous attempts to equate his killing to the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi.

While the killing of Trayvon Martin has outraged many millions of people, as the Emmett Till murder did many years ago, the attempts to draw a straight line between the two events are superficial and misleading. The significance of the Trayvon Martin tragedy cannot be understood by skipping over 55 years of history.

Among various middle-class “left” organizations whose stock in trade is identity politics, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), the equation of the two events is meant to imply that nothing has changed since the dawn of the mass civil rights movement of the last century. Notwithstanding the dismantling of the Jim Crow system of segregation in the US South and ending of legally sanctioned racial discrimination more generally, these forces insist, the Trayvon Martin killing shows that race is, was and always will be the essential question in American society.

The ISO speaks of “Jim Crow II” and echoes the call by black Democrats such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton for a new civil rights movement.

Not only has the goal of social equality that animated millions in the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s not been realized, the concentration of wealth at the top is greater than ever and continues to grow. The legacy of past injustice finds present-day expression in higher unemployment rates for African-Americans and other minorities and a prison and criminal “justice” system that targets minority youth in particular.

This, however, is an indictment of capitalism and the class oppression upon which it is based. The conditions disproportionately affecting minority workers and youth reflect the impact of the economic crisis on the most vulnerable and oppressed sections of the working class.

These conditions are also an expression of the limitations and ultimate failure of the civil rights movement itself, despite the heroism and courage of millions of participants, precisely because it was not based on a conscious struggle to unite the working class in the fight for a socialist program.

Coming from figures like Jackson, the call for a new civil rights movement is cynical and dishonest. Today, after decades

of declining living standards for the working class as a whole, and in the midst of a new global breakdown of capitalism, every demand for democratic and social rights comes up against the decay of the profit system—the system that Jackson, Sharpton and the present-day civil rights establishment represent and defend.

The actual history of the civil rights struggle shows what has changed in the past half century and why the issues posed by the death of Trayvon Martin can be resolved in a progressive fashion only through a socialist movement of the working class, not a civil rights protest movement that seeks to reform the system.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who was spending part of the summer of 1955 visiting his great uncle Mose Wright in the delta region of northwest Mississippi, near the town of Greenwood. He was brutally beaten and shot to death on August 28, 1955, for the “crime” of allegedly speaking to a white woman. His murderers, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, were quickly tried and acquitted by an all-white jury less than a month later, a typical outcome under the system of racial apartheid and terror that was enforced in the South by the Democratic Party. The jury took barely an hour to find the killers not guilty, and one juror said, “If we hadn’t stopped to drink pop, it wouldn’t have taken that long.”

Emmett Till was the latest victim of a system of racial terror that had persisted since the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction more than three quarters of a century earlier. The African-American population in Mississippi was then, as it remains today, a greater percentage of the total population than in any other US state, but blacks were denied the most basic of civil rights, including the right to vote, to equality in public accommodations, transport, education and every area of life. In addition they faced the daily reality of humiliation, abuse and the threat of violence. All major officeholders in the state at that time, including the governor, were Democratic segregationists, whose political careers were based on the racist system that kept white and black workers divided.

The response to Till’s murder, however, set it apart from countless similar lynchings of innocent blacks over the preceding decades. The context was the post-World War II economic boom, which brought with it a growth of the

industrial working class. Masses of Southern blacks migrated to the North to secure better-paying factory jobs. The CIO unions such as the United Auto Workers reached their membership peaks, even as the pro-capitalist bureaucracy consolidated its grip on these organizations.

Anger at systematic discrimination, which had been simmering and growing for decades, erupted under conditions of growing strength and confidence among black workers and continuing militancy among industrial workers as a whole. It also took place under conditions where American imperialism, in the midst of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, increasingly found the Jim Crow system a hindrance to its efforts to expand its global power under the banner of “democracy” and “freedom.”

The year 1955 has gone down as a turning point in the fight for racial equality. The growing determination to fight back was reflected in the decision of Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, to show the horrific consequences of her son’s lynching in an open casket, an action that evoked national and international revulsion against racist brutality.

Within a few months, the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott had begun. Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as the most eloquent spokesman of a growing Southern-based mass movement. Soon the sit-in movement, followed by the Freedom Rides and mass protests that defied repression and white supremacist terror, forced a reluctant federal government to enact several pieces of reform legislation, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The reform legislation of the 1960s, however, proved to be the last gasp of liberal reform in the US. The legal system of segregation was swept away, but the social and economic system of inequality remained. Precisely because it never challenged capitalist property relations, the civil rights movement could not eliminate poverty and inequality.

The legacy of the civil rights movement is a contradictory one. Jim Crow segregation was finally overcome. Race relations changed in important ways. Interracial marriage, illegal in many US states before 1967, is now not only legal, but according to the latest census data, has risen by 28 percent over the last decade, accounting today for one in ten married couples.

The legal changes and socioeconomic shifts find their reflection in changes in social attitudes, especially among youth. More and more there is a recognition that racial divisions are not only reactionary, but are based on an anti-scientific myth that equates skin color with racial classifications. On census forms, growing numbers of people identify themselves as multiracial or refuse to classify themselves by race entirely.

At the same time, decaying capitalism creates deepening poverty and insecurity, and the ruling class, as it attacks every section of working people, seeks to divide the working class by such means as anti-immigrant and law-and-order campaigns,

epitomized by the reactionary “stand your ground” law in Florida and other states.

The Republican Party today is the most blatant purveyor of this filth, with its not-so-veiled appeals to racial prejudice. At the same time, divisions along racial lines are encouraged by the practitioners of identity politics, primarily within the orbit of the Democratic Party.

In the 1960s, the heyday of the civil rights movement, King himself began to understand that the struggle for equality raised fundamental class issues. His only answer was an amorphous “poor people’s campaign” to unite working people in a struggle for broader reforms.

The failure of the civil rights movement to grapple with the fundamental class issues helped pave the way for the ruling class to buy off a small privileged layer of the African-American population, while leaving the vast majority behind. Black capitalist politicians and millionaire spokesmen like Jackson and Sharpton are part of the privileged layer, the product of such policies as “black capitalism” first embraced by Republican President Richard Nixon more than 40 years ago.

The call by Jackson and his supporters for a revived civil rights movement is part of a conscious effort to hide the lessons of civil rights history, and to block the emergence of a movement of the working class outside of the Democratic Party. These forces, including the ISO and other pseudo-left groups, seek to prevent workers and young people from drawing any conclusions about capitalism and its political representatives, above all President Barack Obama.

One of the most obvious goals of their references to Emmett Till is to build up support for Obama’s reelection campaign. While the White House carries out a program of unprecedented reaction and prepares even greater attacks on jobs, education, health care and every other basic need, workers are being told that the reelection of this Wall Street government is the only thing that stands between them and the return of racial oppression.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects all such calls to vote for Obama and the Democrats, as well as the racial and identity politics that underlie them. We insist that only the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program can meet the demands for justice unleashed by the killing of Trayvon Martin and secure victory in the fight for social equality that was the aspiration of the millions who were brought into struggle following the murder of Emmett Till.



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